

REGINA SHEN: ENDURANCE

LANCE ERLICK

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ONE

Alaska Wilderness, August, Year 298 ACM (After Community Movement):

The advantage of being a Marginal outcast was that I didn't need much more than food and water to survive. Well, maybe a blanket, since we didn't have Alaska's chilly nights in the Richmond Swamps where I grew up.

While my mother cooked squirrel over a shielded fire, I used my binoculars to scan the spruce-covered mountainside, fields of wheat in the valley below, and Fairbanks in the distance. The last of the snow had melted from the peaks up north months ago, drying up some of the streams. I looked for telltale signs of Department of Antiquities' gray-uniformed agents with their marked all-terrain vehicles and their aerial drones out hunting for me.

A ridge hid Mom's fire from the valley. She was talking to Ester Grayer, who was a year older than me. Ester had been my travel companion for almost three months, ever since I met her during a storm back east.

I brushed away a swarm of black flies and joined them. I stared at my mom's wrinkled face. She was the only person of Chinese ancestry I'd known until I'd come out west. "I can't believe you worked with the Department."

Her expression blank, she handed me a scrap of squirrel meat. "It kept you free for a while."

"Until the Federation discovered that my DNA might prevent a worldwide fertility collapse." I took the meat and chewed off a stringy bite. "Speaking of which, why are my genes so valuable? So unusual? Maybe even one of a kind?"

"I don't know, Regina." Mom glared at me. Obviously, she wanted me to stop asking questions.

Ester's tanned forehead creased. She squeezed my arm to signal for me to drop it. I couldn't. "Who donated their DNA to you? Who gave me genes the Federation is willing to kill for?" I took another bite of the tough meat.

"The donor is long dead," Mom said. "There's no point digging into that wound."

"Then dig this. You abandoned my sister and me. How can I trust you?"

"It's good to be careful, but you need allies. You can't run on your own. You can't hide from the Federation without help. Now, if you don't mind, we have a long day tomorrow. Eat up and get some rest."

I finished the meat and looked up. "The thought of you with Chief Inspector Joanne Demarco makes my skin crawl." The coarse-faced head of the Department of Antiquities had been hunting me for two years on behalf of the World Federation, and using my sister Colleen as bait to trap me.

"Get some sleep. I'll take first watch."

Ester took my hand, pulled me away from the campfire, and led the way up a narrow path to a cleft of rock. This would be our shelter for the night, assuming no wild creatures had taken it already. Of course, night was a relative term this far north in the summer.

"It'll all work out," Ester said. In Alaska's prolonged twilight amidst the forest's shadows, her thin face and olive complexion took on a ghostlike appearance.

Earlier in the day, she'd insisted that I give Mom another chance. She didn't know how cold

and calculating my mother could be. After all, who abandons her children during a storm?
“Thanks for coming with me,” I said. It was good to have someone to share my trials.

We climbed into a shallow gully from which we couldn't see the trail. Sequoia and spruce hid much of the sky and hopefully us from any drones. Agents that might wander this way shouldn't be able to see us, either, unless they used infrared. We couldn't last for long out here, but we did have several days' worth of food and water and bows to hunt with. Thermal sheets would provide warmth against the chilly night and protection against drone infrared sensors, or so I hoped.

Just in case, I placed my crossbow beside me and looped my backpack straps around my leg. Having grown up in the crowded swamps back east, I viewed sparsely populated Alaska as a blessing. Though climate warming had made Alaska more attractive than it used to be, World Federation policies and the collapse in global population had kept Alaska an under-populated green haven.

With headquarters in Antarctica, the Federation restricted movement for all except our ruling Grand Old Dames and their Elite administrators. Professionals could only move to fill specific jobs, while Working Stiffs were tied to their land, factories, and mines. Marginals like me were condemned to the drenched side of Barrier Walls that the Federation had built to hold back rising seas. With help, I'd crossed the Wall onto Federation lands three months earlier to go to university. To say that hadn't worked out would be the understatement of the year.

With the right preparations, one could disappear in Alaska and avoid capture, though that wasn't my only goal. Months ago, Chief Inspector Demarco kidnapped my younger sister. Demarco said she'd taken Colleen down to the Southwest Desert. The chief inspector's power-hungry rival, Inspector Vikki Volpe, set up roadblocks and sent out every available drone and agent to hunt me down. As the military arm of the Federation, the Department of Antiquities had every resource at their command. I didn't.

I tried to get comfortable amidst fallen branches on the rocky ground. Ester draped her arm over me and moved closer. Together, we studied constellations peeking through a clump of spruce and the prolonged twilight.

Separated from me, Ester might have avoided the dragnet, though I doubted it. Both Demarco and Volpe acted as if Ester knew more than she did. Ester had cast her lot with me, but her previous two years as a farm Working Stiff had softened her. Distant howling wolves had her on edge. I held her until she fell asleep, keeping my ears tuned to the breeze, the sound of distant wolves, and whatever else the night might bring.

* * *

Rustling startled me. The almost perpetual daylight disoriented my sense of time. I grabbed my crossbow and looked for Ester. She wasn't beside me.

I inched over the top of the gully, expecting to face Demarco or Volpe holding my companion as ransom for my surrender.

Ester hurried up the trail, out of breath. “Hey there, sleepyhead.” Her voice trembled. “I can't find your mom or her stuff.”

I checked my timepiece: four in the morning. Mom never woke me for my watch. “She'll turn us in to save her skin,” I said. “What about our cycles?”

“Where we left them. Why?”

“Grab your gear. Let's move.”

I checked my backpack. Satisfied that nothing was missing, I headed down to where Mom was supposed to have kept watch. She'd wiped the area clean, removing all trace of last night's

campfire.

“Did she leave a note?” Ester asked.

“My mother doesn’t leave notes. She runs off to her Antiquities friends.” The saddlebags on the cycles looked untouched. I didn’t have time to check.

Rather than head down the trail into a possible trap, we walked our electric cycles along a path that moved laterally across the mountainside. If Antiquities agents were nearby, we needed another way off the mountain and a different place to wait out the roadblocks until we could head south to Flagstaff to look for my sister.

“What about the Svenkov farm?” Ester asked. “Our trucker friends said we could trust them.”

“Quiet,” I said, picking up my pace.

“What’s eating you?”

When the trail narrowed, I pushed my cycle uphill around what looked like a rocky avalanche up ahead.

“We could have gone the other way,” Ester said, huffing to keep up.

I dragged my cycle over a ridge and hurried down the other side. When I reached a wildflower-covered clearing with several paths, I took out my binoculars to scan the trails.

“Regina, have I done something wrong?” Ester asked. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No!”

“You’re acting paranoid. We’re alone in the mountains.”

“I’m not paranoid,” I said, choosing a path that looked smoother.

“Then what?”

I took a deep breath. “Today’s my birthday. My eighteenth birthday.” I bit back my anger.

“Happy birthday. If you’d told me—”

“What mother forgets her daughter’s birthday?”

“Oh.” Ester squeezed my hand. “Let me make it up to you.”

“Don’t bother. It’s just another day, another example that my mother doesn’t care.”

“Don’t let her ruin things. I’m on your side.”

I smiled. “You’re all the birthday present I need. Let’s go before Antiquities agents get lucky.”

We set off for the Svenkov Cooperative, hoping our trucker friends, Kona-bear and Grizzly-bear, wouldn’t steer us wrong. Sticking to trails and side roads, we reached the highway and the trucker oasis, surrounded by fields of wildflowers. A single police truck staked out the restaurant in front. The cabin in back would have clean sheets, a shower, and too much attention from nearby authorities; besides, Kona and Grizzly weren’t there. They were out delivering a load and wouldn’t return for a week.

“You want to go, don’t you?” Ester said, seeing me eye the highway heading east.

My heart and gut urged me to go. I shook my head. “If Inspector Volpe grabs me, I’ll never see Colleen again.” After two years of captivity, Colleen was fifteen now, and she had to be scared. With all the roadblocks, police, Antiquities agents, and drones, Kona-bear and her driving companion were our only reasonable option for the trip south.

I bit back the pain. Ester had followed me from farm to university and across the country’s desert interior to Alaska. She’d sacrificed everything and hadn’t given up on me. The burden weighed heavily, yet I couldn’t give up on my sister, either.

“What’s your plan?” Ester asked.

I sighed. I didn’t have a plan. “Volpe tried to kill Demarco,” I said. “She won’t hesitate to kill Colleen. Demarco will hold her until I deliver either myself or a DNA vault with samples of

human DNA from before the Collapse. If I don't, she'll kill Colleen."

Ester squeezed my arm. "Until Kona and Grizzly return, we need to hide. They trust Svenkov."

"Bird-watcher," I used her trucker name, "maybe you're right. We could try hiding in plain sight."

We followed paths parallel to the highway until we reached the Svenkov Cooperative. A prominent sign announced they were hiring for the harvest. The grounds looked inviting, with a picket fence out front instead of the stone and concrete walls with barbed wire that we'd seen on other farms. A cluster of big buildings stood beside and behind a stately three-story mansion.

We parked our cycles outside the fence for a closer look. "It's okay," Ester whispered. "Grizzly-bear said they do canning. They're not slavers."

I wasn't convinced. Kona and her partner had done so much for us, driving with us from Louisville to Fairbanks. They hadn't turned us over to police or Antiquities, despite several chances to do so. Yet working for an Elite farmer carried risks. The alternative was staying in the wilderness with agents sweeping the area. Ester would do it if I asked, but she looked exhausted. I'd already asked too much of her.

"Let's go," I said.

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The first time Geo sees Annabelle, they meet as enemies and she doesn't kill him, which mystifies them both. It's after the 2nd Civil War with the nation divided into an all-female Federal Union and a warlord controlled Outland. The Outland warlord kidnaps Annabelle's sister and kills Geo's pa. Can Annabelle and Geo overcome mutual distrust and work together to rescue her sister and gain justice for his pa's murder? Will their feelings for each other derail or further their goals?

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Living on the seaward side of barrier walls built to protect against rising seas, the only means of survival for Regina Shen is underwater salvage, which is banned by the World Federation. After a storm takes a friend's family and home, Regina is determined to help by defying the Federation

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lance Erlick writes science fiction thrillers for young adult and adult readers. He is the author of *The Rebel Within*, *The Rebel Trap*, and *Rebels Divided*, three books in the Rebel series. In those stories, he explores the consequences of Annabelle Scott following her conscience. He authored the Regina Shen series—*Regina Shen: Resilience*, *Regina Shen: Vigilance*, *Regina Shen: Defiance*, and *Regina Shen: Endurance*. This series takes place after abrupt climate change leads to the Great Collapse and a new society under the World Federation. A related short story is *Regina Shen: Salvage*. His latest novel is *Xenogeneic: First Contact* about encounters with an alien race aiming to take over Earth. Lance is also the author of unrelated short stories.

Find out more about the author and his work at LanceErlick.com. Go to the website or sign up [here](#) to receive occasional email newsletters with links to free short stories, and updates on new releases and other writing developments.